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Plan for a UN spy in space to police world

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THE LAUNCHING of an international spy satellite is proposed in an unpublished report that will shortly be presented to United Nations secretary-general Kurt Waldheim.

The idea is to police the earth from space: a UN reconnaissance satellite could help to prevent hostilities by providing almost instantaneous photographic evidence of the build-up of military forces.

Reconnaissance satellites have now reached an astonishing degree of accuracy. From 150 miles up, the American Big Bird satellite can identify the make and model of a car on a road and read its licence plate. In 1978 CIA director Stansfield Turner claimed that from space the Americans could distinguish between a solitary Guernsey or Hereford cow sitting in a field.

The new generation of spy satellites is making the James Bond style of intelligence-gathering increasingly anachronistic. An international reconnaissance satellite would break the present super-power monopoly of what has probably now become the most important source of intelligence information.

During the past three years a group of UN experts under the chairmanship of French space specialist Hubert Bortzmeyer has been drawing-up proposals for an International Satellite Monitoring Agency. Secretary of the group is Mrs Liselotte Waldheim-Natural, daughter of the UN secretary-general. The UN experts' report is due to be discussed next May during the General Assembly's special session on disarmament. Dr Bhupendra Jasani, a technical consultant who helped to draw up the report, believes that the spy satellite project is viable.

The scheme should be pursued, and real efforts made to overcome the financial and political problems.

The study argues that international reconnaissance from space would help to enforce peace treaties and monitor military activity. It would represent an extension of the peacekeeping role of the United Nations whose observers are stationed in trouble spots.

International spy satellites could be useful in a number of different ways. Already, for example, the United States has privately supplied photographs of Sinai to both Israel and Egypt. Pictures from a spy satellite might have confirmed whether South Africa was planning to test a nuclear bomb in the Kalahari Desert in 1977.

Photographic evidence has provided both super-powers with detailed information on military operations in sensitive areas like the Iran-Iraq border. Finally, an international reconnaissance satellite could play a useful part in verifying strategic arms limitation treaties.

Despite the advantages of a UN satellite, there are big problems that would have to be overcome if the International Satellite Monitoring Agency is ever established. The cost would be enormous — almost certainly higher than the entire budget of the United Nations.

To launch a single spy satellite and to set up a data-analysis centre might cost £500 million. To keep the whole world under constant observation would probably require three satellites, and their expected life might only be about a year.

There are also the political and legal problems of how the data would be used. Should photographs be taken without the authority of the nation concerned? Would the pictures themselves be publicly released, or would the information derived from them merely be passed in confidence to governments? All these difficult issues would have to be resolved before international approval was given.